Interview with James J. Gormley

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

JAMES J. GORMLEY

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Could you give me a bit about your background? Where you were born, grew up and were educated?

GORMLEY: I was born and grew up in New York City, in Queens. I went to parochial grammar school, public high school. I went to Fordham College School of Business and took a degree in Management. I was then in the Army for two years.

Q: Could we give a date? When were you born?

GORMLEY: 1932.

Q: 1932 and so you got your degree in..?

GORMLEY: 1954.

Q: What was your major?

GORMLEY: Management. I was in the Army then from 1954 to 1956, drafted, of course. I spent all my time in the United States, mostly in Signal Corps supply. After I got out of the Army I worked for a while in a bank, a very short while, a matter of months. Then I worked

for a couple of years in the Department of Agriculture, the Agricultural Marketing Service, operating a field office in New York which covered the Northeastern States.

Q: What type of work would you do?

GORMLEY: That was mainly concerned with such programs as the school lunch program, and the milk program in schools. It had two aspects; one was supervising the work of the states and the second was— some states would administer the program for both public and private schools, others wouldn't—for those states where they did not supervise the private schools themselves, we gave directly. Then in 1959 I went to work for a brokerage house as a security analyst and I was there for about five years. In the end I was covering automobile, tire, farm equipment, publishing companies. I got tired of that, I just couldn't stand going to work on the subway, and some other reasons. I entered the Foreign Service in September of 1964.

Q: Why the Foreign Service? How did you hear about it and how did you get into it?

GORMLEY: In the last few years I was on Wall Street—I don't know how long it was —I was looking to get out and into something that I—well basically I wanted to get into something political. I know that in 1962 or 1963, I can't remember now, I did try to get on Rockefeller's staff; I thought he would make a good president.

Q: This was Nelson Rockefeller?

GORMLEY: Nelson Rockefeller. And I explored a lot of other avenues there but the Foreign Service was always an option. I took the test and passed it and came in.

Q: So you came in in 1964?

GORMLEY: That is right.

Q: Did you have an entry class?

GORMLEY: Yes.

Q: What was it like, what was the composition of it, what was the spirit of the class?

GORMLEY: Well the composition was, as in those days you might imagine, all white; there were, I believe, four women, three of whom in the course of time married and left. I believe there is only one who may be still in or recently retired. I don't think there was a spirit in this class, it was a disparate group. I am trying to think now how many of them I have seen in the last year on a friendly basis; I can only think of one.

Q: How was your training? How did you think it prepared you for the Foreign Service at that time?

GORMLEY: It was a mixed bag; I didn't think it was especially good. Just before I left —this had nothing to do with the class itself—we had this check list of people we were supposed to see and I have no idea of who said this to me, it was probably someone in post management, but it was the best piece of advice I got in the first few months of my foreign service career. And that was, “Remember, if you say anything derogatory about anybody else in the Foreign Service, count on it, he is going to hear it.” And that is certainly true. So anytime I said anything derogatory I meant the guy to hear it.

Q: What was your first assignment?

GORMLEY: My first assignment was Mexico City. I was for a while on the visa line, for a while in American citizen special services—protection basically—which was a lot of fun with the kind of characters that come through there. That was about six months altogether, mostly protection. Then I was for six months sort of a gofer in the economic and commercial section. After a year in Mexico City I was sent down as vice consul to M#rida which was great because the consul left soon after I arrived and the new consul didn't come in for two months and it was a very heady experience.

Q: Well let's go back to Mexico City. What was it like on the visa line? What type of cases were you dealing with and how were you supervised?

GORMLEY: I suppose it was not as bad as places I have heard about like the Dominican Republic but it was bad enough; there were a tremendous number of cases every day, the vast majority of which were not entitled to a visa. I remember that when I first arrived I was staying at the Maria Isabel Hotel whose dining room looks directly across at the entrance to the visa section so at breakfast I could see my customers already lined up. Many of them would be campesinos, there with their white pants and white shirt, broad brimmed straw hats, thinking that they were going to the States as tourists. I think anybody on the visa line who didn't have a seventy percent refusal rate wasn't doing their job.

Q: Was there much second-guessing of "why did you do this" or were you pretty much told you have a seventy percent refusal rate and get out there and do it?

GORMLEY: No, No. There was no pressure either to deny or to let in people. At least I never experienced it. Remember this was only one month that I was there. There is a tremendous amount of pressure on the local staff. You would have these young girls in their early '20s crying from the kind of treatment they were receiving from the visa applicants. It was a pressure-filled place and you had to try and keep spirits up until the day ended. Certainly from the moment you started until you closed down, say at three or four o'clock, there was never a let-up, you would eat lunch on the run.

Q: You said the protection of welfare was a lot of fun. Can you think of any cases that you had that particularly stick in your mind?

GORMLEY: I don't know if these are useful for diplomatic history, more for dinner table conversation.

Q: Well that's all right; these things get used.

GORMLEY: The thing that is unique about Mexico, maybe Canada too, but I think more in Mexico, is that Americans cross the border and think that American laws still apply. You would continually have people thinking that the US government could order Mexican officials around and it was always disillusioning to them to be told that no, this is their country and they run things. We do things according to their laws; American laws don't apply here. I remember a case where a woman had called up the duty officer about a problem she had. She had rented a house. In back of the house was a settlement of squatters and they were urinating against her wall, which she said had caused her son to have typhoid or something, I forget what it was. She was calling to US Embassy to see that this situation was corrected. Apparently the duty officer had given her not too kindly treatment, a little short shrift; but I did get on and told her that she should call the police but that we would definitely follow up. I gave her plenty of soft soap because she was so mad at the duty officer. I wrote a memo on it and I suggested three things that the US could do to solve her problem. One was to take it up to the UN Security Council, the second was that the Ambassador should make a speech against pissing on walls, and the third was that USIS should issue a pamphlet against the practice. After that I didn't see there was anything we could...no, no, the last one I think was that Americans should look over their walls before they sign a lease.

Again I think these are hardly of great moment, but I had a call one time from a woman in Ohio who was calling about her son. He was seventeen or eighteen, anyway a young man, not a kid, who apparently was having a lot of problems with the family he was staying with in Mexico City. She said I should go out and see him, I guess she called maybe midnight, get him into a hotel and see that he is settled and get him out of this bad situation. I said, “Madam, your son is here, you are in Cleveland, if he has a problem why doesn't he directly contact me? Anyway the State Department does not run a global baby sitting service.” Immediately the old threats about writing Congressmen, etc., but that was the last I heard of the case.

Q: Then you went down to M#rida? Where is that located and what is its local political and economic situation?

GORMLEY: The whole Yucat#n Peninsula has always had a very large amount of separatist sentiment. They don't regard themselves as Mexicans. The biggest manufacturing employer in the peninsula was Cordemex, a cordage company, nationalized. I heard the director, who was a Mexican, complaining that on the job application anytime it would say nationality they would always put Yucateco. Yucatan had declared independence at least twice—at the time of the Mexican War and the time of the Revolution they had declared themselves independent, neither time lasted very long. Of course, the overwhelming majority of the population was Maya, a very, very nice people. Basically gentle, honest, clean—a thing that they would say would distinguish them from other Mexicans. Even the upper class which was generally called the casta divina, the divine caste, spoke Maya, learning it from the maids. Like all the states in Mexico the political system was completely dominated by Mexico City. The local politicians had to have a patron in Mexico City. The decision on who would be governor would be made in Mexico City and that required the various contenders, within the one party, within the PRI, go on pilgrimages to Mexico City and pay off whoever had to be paid off, do favors or promise to do favors for whoever was there. And that was how you got a governor. The church was very strong there as it wasn't in some other parts of Mexico. The Archbishop was an important political figure and the Catholic Church was strong. The PAN shortly after my time there actually won the mayoralty in M#rida and I believe they have come very close to winning the governorship on more than one occasion.

Q: What were the principal duties of a consular officer there?

GORMLEY: It was a mix of things. Because it was so far from Mexico City and had such an amount of separatist sentiment, there was a lot of reporting on the general political feelings there. Before I got there, (I am not sure exactly when it was closed down) there was a CIA station mainly focused on Cuba because Cuba is very close to Yucat#n. Before

Castro the connection between M#rida and Havana was closer than it was between M#rida and Mexico City; most of the doctors, for instance, had been graduated from Cuban medical schools. There was a Cuban consul in M#rida, the only other foreign consul in town. My boss when I got there was fixated on the Cuban consul and on communists in general to such a degree that I think it was counterproductive.

Q: How did this manifest itself?

GORMLEY: Again, before I got there he had engaged in a campaign, some people might say a vendetta, to get rid of the director of state public education, who I assume was a communist. And he succeeded in getting him put out as director of state education. He then resurfaced as head of the electricity authority which meant we never got authority to operate the transformer that ran our air conditioning and so while you were going over one hundred degrees most of the year we had no air conditioning when I got there. One of the first things I did after he left was to go call on the director of electricity and tell him that we were having a problem, that we had no authority to install our transformer and I was dying from the heat, could he do something about it. He said to me, “I'm very sympathetic but nobody from the consulate has ever come to see me about it.” I said, “I'm here now, I'm seeing you about it.” We got our air conditioner. I always made it a point every time I saw him to give him a big abrazo, partially to embarrass him, I suppose.

Q: But also to keep the air conditioner going.

GORMLEY: Then economically we were still interested at that point, I assume that it is a dead industry now, in the henequen production. Henequen was used for agricultural baler twine in the States.

Q: Henequen is what, is a twine?

GORMLEY: It is a cactus plant and they make rope and twine out of.

Q: Well I think they still use that. My understanding is that although they use plastic as cordage for so many things, for baling things for livestock, particularly cattle, they can't have anything plastic because eventually the cows eat the stuff and it gets in their stomachs. You have to have something that is dissolvable.

GORMLEY: Yes, it's just that I am not sure now how much of the industry still exists. Certainly the last time I was down there, in 1987 I guess, there was very little henequen being produced at that point. But henequen was the basis of the whole economy in the peninsula, they called it “green gold.” Certainly in the early part of the twentieth century it was a fantastically prosperous area; big, big houses—some of them by the '60s in derelict condition. But we were still reporting on that. We were encouraging the production of winter vegetables for transport to Florida especially. There weren't that many American businessmen we had to deal with.

Q: The big tourist industry at Canc#n had not started at that point?

GORMLEY: No. Canc#n had not...I am not even sure when Canc#n was brought into being.

Q: Probably in the '70s.

GORMLEY: Of course, the ruins themselves were a major tourist attraction—especially for Europeans, more so than for Americans—and they were well developed, especially at Chich#n Itz# and Uxmal. In the Caribbean you did have Cozumel and Isla Mujeres which were resort islands but nothing compared to the cut-rate, package vacation land that Canc#n is now.

Q: How did the writ of our Embassy in Mexico City run there? Did it have any effect on you?

GORMLEY: One of the great things about being there at that time, I suppose it is not true now, was that there were no communications except the telephone which was out half the time. They really couldn't ride too much herd on us. All of our communications were by airgram rather than by telegram. The distance lent a lot of enchantment.

Q: After that you came back to Washington?

GORMLEY: Well from M#rida I was assigned, got orders to go to Vietnam, which I did not welcome.

Q: Were you married at the time?

GORMLEY: No.

Q: Did you get some training before you went to Vietnam?

GORMLEY: Yes, I got a whole year at FSI.

Q: What did the training consist of and what did they tell you you were going to be doing?

GORMLEY: The bulk of the group was assigned to CORDS, there may have been one or two persons who were going to work at the Embassy but most of us were all going to CORDS. CORDS wasn't that old an organization by that time, although it was a successor to another alphabet organization, OCO I believe. We were all being prepared for rural development. The language course was good, not all of FSI's language courses are good, and I thought the area studies component was quite thorough, quite good.

Q: Here you were taking training for a year, this would be 1967, 1968?

GORMLEY: Starting in about August of 1967 and ending July 1968.

Q: Tet was when?

GORMLEY: Tet was January of 1968.

Q: What was your feeling and the feeling of your colleagues about going to Vietnam at the time and our involvement there?

GORMLEY: Very few of us had volunteered for it, as a matter of fact I suppose the bulk of the class was a junior officer pool going on their first tour. I think a lot of them when admitted into the Foreign Service had had to pre-agree to go to Vietnam, so there wasn't much enthusiasm for the idea of going there. I think virtually everyone in general approved of the main thrust of the policy; you could disagree with a tremendous amount of the execution but there was no one in the group who I recall who actually thought that the major thrust of this was wrong. Everybody thought it was right.

Q: What about the area studies, were you getting people coming back talking to you with enthusiasm about what was going on?

GORMLEY: Again, here you get to the point of execution. So much of what the administration was doing in there was kidding itself and so much of what we were getting very often was propaganda and what we thought were lies. You could not believe most of what we were getting, unfortunately.

Q: What type of thing—because I am trying to recreate the spirit of the times—when you say getting lies, at that point struck you as not being correct?

GORMLEY: Now we are going back to a long time ago.

Q: Oh, I know, I understand, and this is hard.

GORMLEY: I wish I could recreate it. I remember—let me start with some random things and maybe I will make some coherence out of it, although I doubt it. I remember one time we were being instructed or getting something from some Army people on interrogation

etc., etc., and this guy was basically approving the use of torture. I remember one of our group who was a lawyer got up and said, “But isn't this all in violation of due process?” At the time all of us tough minded types laughed and said, “So what.” But in retrospect I think that was one of the leading questions of the course; the United States cannot operate that way. That is one of the people I still see, I was just talking to him the other day on the phone.

Q: Who was this?

GORMLEY: His name is Harry Quillian. He wasn't in the Foreign Service very long. It was his second or third tour and he was assigned to the consulate in Da Nang instead of to CORDS. He was very opposed to the Vietnam war and was my roommate for a very short time in Da Nang. He had gone over a short time before I got there and he said when he was leaving for what was purportedly leave that he wouldn't be back and he quit the Foreign Service. A person who I have a great deal of respect for.

Q: How did you find the military? I suppose it was a mixed course with military with you?

GORMLEY: No, not in the language and area courses; they would be participating as trainers and we had to go down to Fort Bragg upon one occasion to the Green Beret school. And there were military on the staff, but there were no military in the course.

Q: Well here you were, a boy from Queens, you're not a country boy and you are going out for rural development. What were they trying to teach you, what were you going to bring to Vietnam?

GORMLEY: They did a lot of very elementary things; we weren't going to dig out any wells but as it happened I ended up in a city, in Da Nang where I didn't have to worry—well there were rural areas even in Da Nang. The idea was more to influence and report on what the Vietnamese were doing and to see that there was some connection between

what the policy was and what was happening down to a very low level of governmental unit in Vietnam, the district.

Q: What was your feeling in going to Da Nang? What was your feeling about—this was the time of the great anti-war protests on the college campuses—these and were they having any repercussions in your training ranks?

GORMLEY: Actually there weren't many great anti-war demonstrations in 1967, 1968. I think Tet really began it. Up until then, I think most people thought that we were winning. General Westmoreland had come back about November of 1967 and talked about how everything was going our way and we were going to wrap this up in a year or so. It was a time of great upheaval but it was not upheaval caused by anti-war sentiment. The assassination of King was during that time and you stood on your balcony in Arlington and watched the fires in Washington; you went into Washington and even on Connecticut Avenue you had troops.

Q: I recall on Wisconsin Avenue seeing the 82nd Airborne with flak jackets walking up and down the streets. I never will forget it.

GORMLEY: So there was plenty of upheaval but at that point it hadn't focused on the war.

Q: It was more race.

GORMLEY: Race and the whole Berkeley thing I think had started in about 1965.

Q: At the University of California.

GORMLEY: And there were the race riots in Watts in 1965. So there was a great amount of upheaval but it wasn't focused on the war during the time we were in training.

Q: Then you went out in the summer of 1968 to Vietnam?

GORMLEY: Right. Oh, I might mention that the group was really upset by Tet in the same way that the American people were. I was very emotional about it. I remember somebody was staying with me, I had a little tiny apartment in Arlington, and it was Saturday morning and I turned on the radio—I had no television in those days. The reader of the news was reporting the Tet attack, obviously not understanding himself the significance of it, and he started reeling off where attacks had taken place. This person was a Mexican and she didn't speak English and she asked what was the matter. I said, “They've attacked every fucking city in Vietnam.” We were furious and the staff was shattered. Of course, one of their contentions was, once they had recovered their balance, that the Viet Cong had shot its wad—which was correct—but we didn't appreciate that at the time.

Q: You had been told that here was a place where things were really under control and yet all these places supposedly under control had had significant fighting.

GORMLEY: And there were symbolic things like the Viet Cong getting into the Embassy and the taking of Hue—it was ferocious to try to get that back.

Q: Then you went over when?

GORMLEY: We probably had some leave because I think we had a week in Taiwan before we went to Vietnam and that week was basically to see the work of the Joint Committee on Rural Reconstruction that had occurred in Taiwan. We got sort of a Potemkin village tour of Taiwan which was very impressive. I visited in Taiwan last year too and that was a lot more impressive.

Q: So you got out to...

GORMLEY: We didn't know where we were assigned until we got to Saigon. I learned later that they had been thinking of putting me into the Embassy-USAID joint economic section, which they did not do. They sent me up to Da Nang.

Q: So you were up in Da Nang at about what time?

GORMLEY: I would have gotten there in September of 1968 and I stayed through February of 1970.

Q: What was the situation in Da Nang while you were there?

GORMLEY: As far as security went we were under a pretty constant threat of rocket attacks. Not the area I was in because it was mostly aimed at the airport which was to the south of us. You got so that you just slept through these rocket attacks; you didn't even hear them, except on one occasion when they decided to change their target and they hit —we were right on the river—a boat carrying fuel right near. That got me out of bed!

Q: When I was in Saigon a little later, you would turn on the radio in the morning and hear where the rockets fell, in what district, and it was like the weather report. If it wasn't your district or the Embassy's district, you know—isn't that interesting.

GORMLEY: I remember staying in a hotel near the central market in Saigon when the central market was hit by rockets. It was interesting.

Q: What type of work were you doing?

GORMLEY: I was the deputy to the senior advisor for the city and our problems were city administration and refugees. Da Nang had been before the war, say in the last days of the French period, say 1939 or 1940, a very pretty little city of about twenty-five thousand people. There were about 250,000 or 300,000 people living in Da Nang when I was there, a lot of them in very squalid refugee camps. One of our projects was the relocation of refugees into more decent housing. The other was just improving city services. We had a very, very great resource in the city, the SeaBees.

Q: The construction battalions of the Navy.

GORMLEY: Right. And they had a strong commitment to civic action. We had a committee, the mayor, the head of the navy civic action group, and ourselves. We did an awful lot of work on small building projects, road projects, that were very positive.

Q: How did you deal with the Vietnamese officials? What was your impression of them and how successful were you in working with them?

GORMLEY: There were two mayors when I was there. The first one was a man whom nobody much liked, who had a reputation for being corrupt. I remember his name, Le Chi Cuong. He was assigned as province chief in one of the delta provinces shortly after I got there. Very amusing man though; at his farewell there were tears in his eyes and no one else's. Every Vietnamese in that room was saying, “God I'm glad to see you go, you bastard.” He was followed by—of course all the people who headed provinces were military men—a colonel who had been head of Diem's palace guard, a Catholic, who, as a matter of fact, had to plead for his life back in 1963 and had succeeded in staying alive and was hustled off to some inconsequential posts in the highlands. Of course Thieu was in power now and this group was back in favor. He was then assigned as mayor in Da Nang. He was very personable and I found him a man very easy to work with. I still kept contact with him on my second tour in Vietnam in 1974. Of course his counterpart was my boss, the senior advisor, but I had a lot of direct contact with him and I felt very flattered when I left. He had a custom for departing Americans of having a dinner for them in City Hall. The mayor had the best chef in Da Nang. When I left he had my farewell at his house which I thought was quite a compliment. With the mayor I always spoke English because the mayor spoke better English than I spoke Vietnamese. The deputy mayor, who in all the provinces was a civilian and usually a graduate of the public administration academy and much younger than the general run of colonels who headed provinces, and I got to be very friendly. He was a very decent man and with him I always spoke Vietnamese because he spoke no English.

Q: How did we work with the Vietnamese? You were trying to resettle refugees for one thing and work on city services, but what was our role?

GORMLEY: In large part we were intermediaries between the city and those in the US military who had resources. But also by the fact that we did control access to resources we could also have a say in what was to be done. I remember that sometimes this was not so well handled. My first boss in Da Nang was a total incompetent; he was a USAID type hired especially for the Vietnam program whose forte had been public recreation; he was allegedly a city manager though I could never determine any city that he had ever managed. He was totally unable to operate in an Asian context. He had, on a specific refugee relocation program, this grandiose idea for more or less Texas style public housing, which was insane—there was no money for it, there was no way of doing it—he was pushing this. The mayor wanted a much more modest thing where mainly we would provide the materials and the people would build their own houses in a certain area which he had selected, which was in a sensible place. Upon one occasion the mayor was briefing on his ideas and my boss was challenging him. Of course he challenged him in English. The mayor completely ignored him, didn't even respond to what he had said. We had on our staff a number of young draftees who because of graduate degrees in various things were lucky enough to not be sent to get shot and were sent to our staff. One of them was a young guy with a degree in architecture, really a terrific, smart young man; of course he was only a corporal and the Vietnamese are extremely rank conscious, for that reason all our people always wore civilian clothes although the mayor knew the guy was only a corporal. After ignoring my boss this young corporal raised certain objections to the mayor's plans and the mayor defended it, showed why he believed this and that; it was such a put-down of my boss it was tremendous.So our relations were mixed. Some of the Americans were pretty poor at any kind of relations with the Vietnamese.

Q: This is one of the things that all of us who served there as Foreign Service officers thought—God, what are we doing, after all these people have been around for a long

time and in many ways know how to do things better. We sort of came in there like a bull elephant.

GORMLEY: Very often, as in that specific case, we would have our own more grandiose ideas and not really listen to people. In the end we did because we got rid of my boss, partly with my machinations, and we got a new senior advisor. The mayor's plan went through and we supported it and it was very successful.

Q: What about the problem of corruption? I Corps, which Da Nang was in, had a general who as I recall was renowned for having warehouses full of his things—I think at that time, I may be wrong on this.

GORMLEY: Well certainly General Lam had a very unsavory reputation. He was still commander up until the time...I believe he was dismissed after the Lam Son operation, the invasion of Laos. But he was still corps commander up until that time. He was a political general, a businessman more than anything else. There was no one there who showed him much respect except for the Marine general who was his counterpart. No one took him seriously as a military man.

Q: What about the problem of corruption? What were your instructions dealing with corruption?

GORMLEY: I am not sure we ever had instructions. Obviously we were to report anything that we saw that was untoward. What I believed in doing was working with the Vietnamese officials who you thought were honest until proven otherwise and cutting off those you didn't. There was, I thought, very little corruption in terms of diversion of materials or that kind of thing. A lot of money was made by those who glommed on to Americans for things like renting property and they were usually pretty unsavory types. I know the leading landlord in Da Nang was a woman who owned seemingly almost everything in town that the Americans rented; she was a lady bountiful to the American colonels in town, she set a great table. I was invited to her house twice until she figured out that I wasn't going to do

her any good. When you speak of corruption, there was an awful lot of corruption, in a real sense, of Americans there, both of abusing our control of resources and of living awfully well in a time when other people are living pretty badly.

Q: I agree, it is disquieting. What was your impression of USAID as an operation in the unique situation there—wartime, sky's the limit type of thing.

GORMLEY: Of course so many of the people were hired specifically for Vietnam and had very little experience with USAID before that, so they were there to fill out this enormous organization that was built up. Some of them went by the book as far as how to do economic development in the country and it was totally irrelevant to what we were about. There were plenty of good people. Certainly the USAID officer in charge, he was called deputy for CORDS, that was the head civilian in our corps, deputy to the commanding general of the Marines up there. When I went there it was an FSO, Charlie Cross, who later became Ambassador to Singapore, and, I believe, to Taiwan at one time though I don't know whether we still had an Embassy in Taiwan. Cross really was not engaged, he just sort of coasted hoping that no one would notice how things were going up there. So you shouldn't report much, just report enough to keep everybody off our backs—until I manage to complete my tour and get the fuck out of here and get an Embassy job. His successor was a USAID type who since has died, his name was Alexander Firfer. He was flamboyant and he was active, and in general shook things up. I thought he was a much more vital presence than Cross had ever been; he was erratic, he was cold to most people, his nickname was “mad Alex.” I think he was a vital force.

Q: What about relations with the military? Da Nang was under a Marine officer, wasn't it?

GORMLEY: Yes. The US commander for I Corps was the commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force. I guess General Walt had had that job previously and when I was there it was a guy named General Nickerson. Nickerson was sort of a Pattonesque type, at least in his own mind.

Q: A couple of revolvers?

GORMLEY: Yes. He certainly could not tolerate talk of corruption about General Lam and he certainly tried to stifle that. Another taboo which we never could criticize was the Korean Marines; again this one wasn't directly concerning us, the people in Da Nang, because we didn't have the responsibility for monitoring General Lam or the marines. The Korean Marines could never be criticized.

Q: They were basically an inert force, weren't they?

GORMLEY: They were super at making sure that they got their share of PX goods and they certainly held their own bases very strongly and terrorized the Vietnamese around them, but that was about it. They were above criticism as far as Nickerson was concerned. They were our great Korean allies.

Q: What I am getting from you is that there was at the top a lot of going along with the situation and not trying to analyze what was happening and setting up concerns.

GORMLEY: As for the big picture, by early in his administration Nixon was beginning the troop pull down and I think at that point the North Vietnamese, very wisely, said well they're getting out and we will not push for a while. So after the end of those mini-offensives that followed Tet in 1968 things were really pretty calm for the rest of the time I was in Vietnam. Oh there was the general low level of guerilla attacks, the rockets, but there was no great battle fought. I think that they very wisely thought that as long as Nixon was under pressure to pull out American troops it was in their interest not to interfere with that. I know Firfer claimed that the low level of activity in I corps was proof that we were winning the war but I held that it was proof that the war was lost, that we were getting out and once out we would never be back. Obviously the people who were here and whose whole aim was uniting their country would succeed; they had the will and we didn't. I said

that to the mayor the first time I talked with him; I think I was the first American official who told him that “You can't rely on us.” He was a little stunned but it turned out to be right.

Q: Did you have any dealings with our consulate there?

GORMLEY: Mostly just on a social basis. I would write up biographical material on officials I was dealing with but it was mostly social. There was a good friend, Don Westmore, and I liked Terry a lot, Terry McNamara; those were the two that were in the consulate that I...Jim Mack came for a little bit late in my tour. They were all good people.

Q: You left there when?

GORMLEY: In February of 1970.

Q: Looking back at it at that time what did you feel, any accomplishments? How did you feel about it when you left?

GORMLEY: One, I never wanted to go in the first place. I still recall flying in and looking at the bomb craters in September of 1968 and saying, “Gormley, you asshole. You had a year and a half to get out of this and you didn't do it.” But when I was there it was the central event of the time and I felt excited to be a part of it. I never did anything that would violate my own conscience and never did anything that would cause me to lose sleep; I felt good about what I had done, even though I felt it was an absolute losing cause. It was a very positive experience; I liked the country and I liked the people.

Q: I must say this reflects somewhat my feeling. I was consul general in Saigon from 1969 to 1970, about eighteen months there. It was seeing the elephant, this was the big event of our time and I think I feel much better about having seen it rather than not. I certainly wouldn't want to go through it again; I liked the Vietnamese, wished them well. My concern was that I thought we got too much involved in everything and I was concerned about our

staying power too. One last thing about this—did you get any feel about what the CIA was doing there and their effect on all of this?

GORMLEY: I had very little contact with Agency people, although there was one whom I knew from the States who was in Saigon and whom I saw when I initially came to Vietnam. I forget whether I saw him again during my tour, maybe I did. He was the one who emphasized to me that thing that I emphasized to the mayor, you can't count on us. He was very pessimistic about our staying power. In Da Nang itself, Cross's deputy when I arrived was CIA, I even forget his name now. They were concerned with the Phoenix program.

Q: Which was basically the elimination, in polite terms, of the communist cadre.

GORMLEY: There was much less extermination in that than the peaceniks would have you believe, but yes, that was it. I did not have much contact with the Agency people, not that I can recall now; reading some of their material, that was about it.

Q: Then you came back for two years, into personnel, is that right?

GORMLEY: Right.

Q: From 1970 to 1972 what were you doing?

GORMLEY: I was in the training office, my responsibility was mostly assignments to long term languages and to universities, some university area studies. I would help out on some of the other things like War College, but that was mainly handled by other people.

Q: What was your impression of the training assignments? Were these rewards? How did we look upon training?

GORMLEY: Well certainly in the ones that I handled there was a lot of interest from bureaus in long term language training. At the time, this is 1970-1971, I know East Asia

Bureau, especially the China desk, was desperate that we train the maximum number of people in Chinese. The interest that they took in who was being assigned depended on the bureau and the country. Certainly the people I dealt with most seriously were the China desk and the Soviet desk; they took a very active part in who was going to be assigned to those languages. I guess that was it, because even a language like Arabic where you would think they might have a great interest in who was assigned, I don't recall that much interest.

Q: Sort of letting the cards fall where they may?

GORMLEY: Yes; leaving it to us.

Q: You were able to use that to get some area studies yourself?

GORMLEY: Well I didn't want area studies, but I took that as a consolation prize.

Q: What had you wanted to do?

GORMLEY: Congressional intern. But I took a year at Yale after that.

Q: What were you studying?

GORMLEY: Officially southeast Asia studies, although I took each semester a course in economic development at the Growth Center there. It was very useful because I was planning on going to an economic job.

Q: So this was 1972-1973. Did you get any feel for the campus spirit in those days? Was it difficult being a foreign service officer on the Yale campus?

GORMLEY: Except in the course I took on the History of Vietnam, no. Not at all; by then the draft had been dropped. I remember one time being in the graduate school cafeteria, mess hall, whatever the hell they call it, I can't remember now—dining room? There was

somebody there trying to promote a trip to Washington to protest about something, he was being laughed at. By this time they were saying “Ah, nostalgia.” Things were very, very much changed.

Q: It gives one a certain pause, the draft was not just moral indignation on the campus but a practicality...

GORMLEY: That certainly would have been my concern.

Q: Yes, I agree. But...

GORMLEY: What did Johnson say about the prospect of hanging?—that it “concentrates the mind.”

Q: Then you went to Bangkok; you served what, about five years with a hiatus going to Vietnam?

GORMLEY: I served four years; I went there in about June of 1973 and stayed to the end of 1977, leaving just before Christmas as I recall, with six months out for Vietnam.

Q: Why don't we take the six months. When did you go to Vietnam and what were you doing?

GORMLEY: I went there in about February of 1974 and stayed there six months, I guess that was to August. I was in the political section in Saigon. This was a program of bringing back people who had been there before, which I think was mainly intended to put them out as sort of political reporters in the provinces; but as it happened I ended up in the political section in Saigon which I was perfectly happy with. It was very, very comfortable living in Saigon for wealthy Americans, and we were all wealthy. It was hell on the ordinary Vietnamese; I saw people fall over in the streets from hunger in 1974. It was a very, very different atmosphere from when I had been there before. All the troops were gone—it was kind of ironic because the war was begun, at least ostensibly, as a rural insurrection, but

the delta was at its most peaceful in those years and at its most prosperous. I went down, I never got very far into the delta, to My Tho once and it was a very pretty, prosperous, peaceful area by then. On the other hand, northwest of Saigon you rode out for an hour, or less than an hour, and you were at the front lines; there were tank emplacements around you and two North Vietnamese divisions looking at you. It was a very different atmosphere.

Q: What was the spirit of the political section at that time? Who was running it?

GORMLEY: Martin was difficult then.

Q: This was Graham Martin who was the Ambassador.

GORMLEY: He was a difficult and aloof figure. He had weird working hours; he would show up very late in the morning or even early afternoon, work until very late, take home a lot of stuff, dealing almost exclusively with his DCM, his station man, and someone who was not the head of the political section but who was the effective head of the political section.

Q: Who was that?

GORMLEY: Al Francis. Because the political counselor was Josiah Bennett, probably younger than I am now but I regarded him as an elderly type, who really was sort of shunted aside to do silly ass things. Al, who was theoretically political-military counselor, actually ran the political section. But all the really serious political work was being done by the station, which handed out the money and had the resources and had the informants at the cabinet level and in the president's office. I was in political internal; the political section had three groups: external, which mainly dealt with North Vietnam and international agencies where we were constantly promoting “our” Vietnamese as the legitimate representatives of the Vietnamese people; the political military section, which dealt with military affairs; and the political internal, which dealt with the civilian government. To a degree I regarded our political internal section as a forward based INR more than a real

political section. We turned out a lot of great stuff, but it was mostly based on—well I was only there for six months but I did develop a lot of good contacts with political figures. But we were producing an enormous volume of political biographies—this was Francis's idea—I don't know whether any historian has had access to them, I think they were all classified until 1999, but considering the state of play I see no reason why they wouldn't have been declassified long ago, whether they have or not I don't know. We produced a series of political biographies which I thought were first rate; an awful lot was based on agency material. I know I did ones on the general who was the President's bagman, General Quang, on General Minh, I did a few on members of the economic team. In a way what we produced helped us to understand what had happened in the early '60's, which was a little late; we didn't know what was happening then.

Q: You are talking about the general's coup and the rivalries and the other...

GORMLEY: We never, at least at the time it was going on, looked at what were the relationships among the generals, who had gone to school with whom, who was whose ally. If you look at who pulled the coup on Diem it was the same group of French oriented generals who had been completely subservient to France and who hated Diem ever since he assumed power—Nhu and Diem were their own worst enemies but they provided the atmosphere for these characters to take over with the connivance of the American Embassy which I think really didn't know what the score was at the time.

Q: While you were there what was the feeling—whither South Vietnam?

GORMLEY: This was also the time of Watergate here in the States, so I think pretty well everyone believed that we were going to lose, though you wouldn't talk that way with a lot of people. The atmosphere we were in was dreadful; the continual pressure from the states, from the opponents of the war, was just enormous at that time. Every violation of human rights by the Saigon government was elevated to a great, terrible thing that we should not be supporting; every violation of the truce, the accords, was treated as a

terrible thing on the South's part but nothing the North did was wrong. We were under this constant barrage both from the press and these orchestrated letter writing campaigns from Amnesty that flooded the Embassy. We had one guy who was sort of responsible for holding bushel baskets of Amnesty letters— “what are you doing about Nguyen Van... who so-and-so is out on Con Son Island.” It was a terrible atmosphere and certainly Graham Martin felt besieged and defensive and he was hitting out at anyone. Martin had a very sarcastic manner—I used to love to read his material—but it was not doing any good. The atmosphere was pretty pessimistic. I remember when Nixon resigned...

Q: August of 1974.

GORMLEY: ...everybody had to go out that day and talk to people and see what their reaction was. I saw the head of the Assembly, Nguyen Ba Can, who I think at one later moment, maybe for 34 hours, was Prime Minister; a very decent man. They all knew what was coming. He said, “I hope this doesn't lessen American resolve,” as if it could be less than it was already. And I had lunch that day with two Vietnamese Senators, I can't recall the name of one but the other was the villain of the early part of the book on John Paul Vann, General Cao who was Vann's counterpart in the delta. Cao was by that time out of the army and a senator and I had lunch with him and this other senator, the lunch had been arranged beforehand; for a while we talked about a lot of other things besides Nixon's resignation, but then when it came to that their contention was, and I think there is an element of truth to it, that Nixon was brought down by his fidelity to the cause of Vietnam. They said that they hoped that the NLF (an obsolete term by that time) doesn't misinterpret this...

Q: NLF being the National Liberation Front...

GORMLEY: Which by 1974 didn't exist except on paper.

Q: By that time it was a completely North Vietnamese run operation.

GORMLEY: They were pretty pessimistic. I remember there was a cartoon—the Saigon press was relatively free, freer than the press at that time in say Malaysia or Singapore which are alleged democracies—in one of the papers which I thought was pretty funny in a macabre way. It was three panels: the first was a southeast Asian general riding an elephant looking very smug, the elephant has a ski nose like Nixon; the second panel shows the air coming out of the elephant; and the third panel shows the elephant flat and the Asian general falling ass over teakettle. I brought that in to Francis and I guess Wolfgang Lehmann, who was the DCM; they didn't, especially Lehmann, think it was amusing. As a matter of fact he thought I was being pretty flip about something that was as disastrous as it was. But I like political cartoons.

Q: In Bangkok, where you served five years except for this hiatus, what were you doing?

GORMLEY: I was the financial reporting officer. It was at the time a big Embassy and it had a big economics section. My main job was macro economics: the balance of payments, the budget, the relationship of the central bank with the Ministry of Finance, also with American bankers coming through in a steady stream, and with the local American Chamber of Commerce.

Q: What was your impression of Thai finance?

GORMLEY: I have a very good impression of most of the economic parts of the Thai government. I have a very good impression of the Thai government, as a bureaucrat myself I sort of admire a system where bureaucrats have as much power as they do in Thailand. The system there when a new political group comes in there are only two jobs in each ministry that they get, the Minister and the deputy Minister, nothing else changes. An even stronger bureaucratic system than the British system which I think goes a little further down; not like in our system where almost down to desk level you can get the niece of some big contributor. I learned street Thai, I never took Thai in FSI; I took the Embassy program and got to about a 2 level speaking, which is enough to deal with taxi drivers,

restaurants, bars and busses and so forth. So I dealt in English but the people I was dealing with were graduates of Oxford, Cambridge, MIT and Harvard. The elite in Thailand is well educated. On any particular issue that I would get instructions from Washington to go and get the Thai view on such and such and influence them to our view, nine out of ten times the person I was dealing with would know more about the issue than I did which was not true in any other country I have served in. Most of the people, young people that I knew at the time, are now very high in this new government. I know the Minister of Finance, whom I knew when he was a young banker in Thailand. The same for the head of the central bank, the people in the budget bureau; here it is twenty years later and there is such a continuity of these people that they are the ones running the country.

Q: So you have a variety of coups and changes of governments but really many of the basic underpinnings don't seem to change very much.

GORMLEY: No. Two of my investments are the Thai Fund and the Thai Capital Fund and every time there is a riot or something and the market goes down, I buy, because it's ephemeral.

Q: How was the effect of the fall of Saigon, in the spring of 1975, and also of Laos and Cambodia, seen from the Thai vantage point?

GORMLEY: From the Thai vantage, one, there was a lot of gnashing of teeth that they had latched on to a loser in the United States; which was why we had tremendous difficulty in keeping the bases that we had used during the war and the Thais certainly made it very difficult and in the end we kept none of them. That whole negotiation was quite interesting.

Q: Did you get involved in that at all?

GORMLEY: Only as an observer and as a source for the Far Eastern Economic Review.

Q: What were your impressions of how that went?

GORMLEY: They were badly handled. The Ambassador, who was a very bright man...

Q: Who was that?

GORMLEY: Charlie Whitehouse...basically a Newport playboy. He never, despite the fact that he had been an Ambassador in Laos, he had been deputy of a CORPS in Vietnam and he had had long experience in the CIA, took Asians very seriously; he was a dilettante. And he was dealing with a newly elected, democratic government—every once in a while you have one of these things there—that was headed by Kukrit Pramoj; and Kukrit, despite the fact that he looks Asian talks like he is from Cambridge (England, not Massachusetts). This throws you off because the guy is a Thai. I remember we were presented with a list of conditions under which some bases would continue to be used by the Army. By this time the permanent secretary in the Foreign Ministry was a guy named Anand Panyarachun, who had been Ambassador to the United States. The general gossip or feeling in the Embassy was—well, Anand had never been taken seriously by the State Department in Washington, he hadn't been treated with the deference he believed he deserved, especially by Kissinger, and he was basically sort of a dog in the manger about the United States, so this list of conditions was just a reflection of Anand's pique and not of Thai policy. Which was nonsense, this was the Thai position, and anyone who didn't realize this was just barking up the wrong tree. So we got this list of conditions—again most of this stuff I saw only because people were showing it to me, I was not on distribution—and Whitehouse sent a telegram to Washington that he was going to see Kukrit and “straighten out Anand.” So he goes to see Kukrit, and Kukrit like a good Thai says “Don't worry there's no problem.” What Kukrit is telling him is, I don't have a problem, you may have a problem; then he wrote a telegram to Washington saying he had talked to the Prime Minister and that the Prime Minister was going to take care of Anand. It was a number of weeks later that it finally dawned on him that this was the Thai position, it was not Anand. I told that story to Anand when I was back there in the late '80s and he just roared laughing. He made the observation that “you people never know who your friends

are.” Anand is a terrific guy, who has recently been Prime Minister. Again one of the great bureaucrats of Thailand.In the negotiations I was only an observer, but I had some good friends with the press. I have always liked dealing with the press; I have never tried to mislead then, never tried to apologize, never tried to fool them. I think a tremendous number of people in the government and in the foreign service distrust reporters terribly. They are defensive, they lie, and then it becomes the press's job to “get them”, and they usually do. Of course, I dealt with these people mostly on economic issues, but they would ask about the base negotiations and I remember one time I said to one of them, the Far Eastern Economic Review—we were near the end of the Ford administration by this time —”To the extent that Henry Kissinger has a future in this government, Charlie Whitehouse doesn't.” That got into the Far Eastern Economic Review, credited to a western diplomat. I assumed that Whitehouse could figure it out but he never said anything about it.

Q: You then left Bangkok in 1978 and you were off to Asunci#n, to Paraguay, was that it?

GORMLEY: Yes.

Q: How did you feel about going to Asunci#n?

GORMLEY: Well I didn't want to go. The job I had wanted was the political-econ job in Singapore, which would have been a very nice job and a logical one to take and Personnel had said that they would arrange it and they didn't come through. You were in a time of what was called by the acronym GOP, which I think was Global Outlook Program or something like that. Kissinger had gone, I think, on a trip to Latin America and found the Ambassadors he was talking to knew nothing about arms control or European affairs and he was furious. He said what you need is to shake up people and send them to different areas of the world. So as it turned out I was assigned to Asunci#n as head of the economics section and the head of the political section was someone who had spent his entire career in south Asia.

Q: Just one question before we move to that, since you were in the economic section what was our impression during the time you were there of the development of ASEAN, because it was essentially an economic alliance.

GORMLEY: Well I don't know that it was essentially an economic alliance; to the extent that it was anything it was more political than economic. These people are more natural competitors than customers for each other and I never took ASEAN that seriously. I don't know what it is today, it seems to be an occasion for the Foreign Ministers to get together and have their parties. I do remember one occasion—I went through so many Prime Ministers when I was there—after the military came back in 1976 they put in a dreadful incompetent little man called Thanin as Prime Minister, a puppet; unguided he would do the weirdest things which even the military didn't want. He had gone down on some trade mission to Singapore and been completely flummoxed by Lee Kuan Yew. Lee Kuan Yew had gotten him to make all sorts of concessions that certainly the bureaucrats had not wanted. I had a friend in the Finance Ministry and I said, “How can you allow this guy to be in the room alone with Lee Kuan Yew?” And he said, “God, we can't even trust him with Suharto.” Before we leave Thailand—certainly there was an awful lot of pessimism around 1975 about being the next domino, by the press, by a lot of casual observers. And certainly the US Commerce Department wrote a very negative report on doing business in Thailand. I happened to be back at the time and they looked at my report on economic trends in Thailand at the time which I think started out with “Thailand is not a teetering domino.” They said, “your report completely contradicts what we have in this report, how do you account for that?” I said, “I account for that because you are wrong.” I remember a Memcon, which I still have, of a conversation with a group of Thai economists in the summer of 1975 in which the whole conversation was basically so upbeat on long term, at the same time there was this panic in the streets and in the reporting going on in the states.

Q: It shows an inability to understand the situation.

GORMLEY: And Solarz came out and Solarz...

Q: This is Stephen Solarz who was a very influential Congressman in dealing with Asia.

GORMLEY: He was a freshman at the time and he knew everything, of course, that's the way most freshman Congressmen do, and he insisted that he have a meeting with the lower level officers of the Embassy as he didn't want to be brainwashed by the Ambassador. So he came in and his general thesis was that this country was on its way to the same thing that Vietnam was, including the Vietnamese Army. And we said “this is nonsense, this is not going to happen, this country is not militarily strong but it is a terribly strong country culturally and the Vietnamese will never make a foothold.” And he said, “Tell me why it is different.” And I must admit Solarz is very educable because at the end of that meeting I think he went out and realized that he was not in another Vietnam. Solarz also became one of the leading champions against the Khmer Rouge later on; Solarz was a very knowledgeable guy by the middle of his Congressional tenure, which I guess is now ended.

Q: And then you went to Asunci#n where you served from 1978 to 1981 as economic and commercial counselor. What was the situation in Paraguay in those days?

GORMLEY: This was the Carter administration and one of the Carter administration's basic tenets was human rights and we had a marvelous opportunity for enforcing this in Paraguay. One, it had a certain notoriety as a human rights abuser and two, it wasn't an important country and therefore subject to being beaten up on. And it happened! It was somewhat ill-timed from the point of view of our economic interests since for the first time in Paraguay's history it was economically important in one respect, they were in the midst of building the biggest dam in the world which had enormous contracts for construction, for turbines, for generators, for all sorts of things. Both Allis Chalmers and Westinghouse were salivating, and General Electric, over these contracts. Both of these dam projects were not carried on by Paraguay alone but mainly by their bigger neighbors, one by the

Brazilians and one by the Argentines. We gave a tremendous amount of support to the effort by Allis Chalmers and Westinghouse to very little avail because our competitors, mainly the Europeans, had no such qualms about human rights.

I think one of the reasons our human rights policy was successful there, our economic policy was not, was partly that Stroessner was no dummy, far from it, and he realized from our pounding on him that he no longer needed to be as authoritarian as he had been in the past. In the course of the time that the principal Ambassador, Bob White, was in Paraguay, you went from a few hundred political prisoners down to about three, which was a major accomplishment. I suppose feeling good is something we like to do. My job was economic and I did try to promote our economic interests, but without great success. I also had to fill in for the political officer when he was out and I became very friendly with the major elements in the human rights movement in Paraguay, which had some very, very good people. I remember having someone say to me “The hall of justice in this country is centered in this Embassy.” That makes you feel good.

Q: What was your view of Stroessner at this time? This was getting near the end of his regime.

GORMLEY: He was ousted in about the beginning of 1989, so that is about eight years down the line. There were constantly rumors of his imminent collapse while I was there. I had a sort of grudging admiration for the old bastard; for one thing, he was certainly no Somoza, is no Somoza—he is out of power but he is still alive. And there was a certain amount of contrast, for instance when Somoza was resident in Paraguay for a number of months there was cause for you to focus on the differences between the two. Stroessner was not a hog, he did not keep the graft for himself, everyone had their share; he was a man profoundly contemptuous of human nature—which I guess I am too. He was a brute, but I sort of admired him.

Q: In one interview, which I didn't do, with an Ambassador that came a little later...

GORMLEY: After White was Lyle Lane and after Lane, I think, Clyde Taylor?

Q: This was the man who went then to Chile.

GORMLEY: I know who you mean. That was before I got there, George Landau.

Q: He said that seeing Stroessner he would always go to receptions in the morning for opening a bridge or opening a road because it was the only time you could sort of catch people "at the office." Stroessner was continually complaining about the people around him, saying that here he was a good German trying to get things done in a Latin country and he couldn't get people to do the work.

GORMLEY: Smuggling was the biggest industry in Paraguay until you had this enormous expansion in the 1970's—the building of the big construction type of dams and an enormous expansion of agriculture largely promoted by Brazilians because in the 1970's Asunci#n, Paraguay, became a Brazilian colony virtually which Stroessner allowed to happen, he had no choice.

Q: Well I was saying that Stroessner found it hard getting people to work.

GORMLEY: Well before those genuine economic developments the principal industry was, and it is still important, smuggling. You bring in cigarettes, you bring in whiskey, you bring in electronic equipment in enormous quantities and then smuggle it into Brazil and Argentina. Of course at times it has also been cocaine.

Q: Cocaine was not a problem then?

GORMLEY: During the time I was there DEA closed down its office in Asunci#n which I guess was their feeling that there was not much point to it. I believe they have reopened it since.

Q: What was your feeling about Robert E. White, a career Ambassador, who became when the Reagan administration took over a very controversial figure? They claimed he was too strong on human rights. What was your impression of his style of operation and effectiveness?

GORMLEY: White was sort of a cowboy, but a tremendously personable guy. I know of no Ambassador that I liked more. He did have a fairly wild style and he certainly did everything to get himself PNGed. I think one of the reasons he never was was that Stroessner realized that it would not hurt him but help him. I liked White a lot; of course he went on to El Salvador, where he really got into trouble. He was in trouble with the right wing long before that, I guess based on what he did in Paraguay because Helms violently fought him getting the El Salvador position. He was certainly a practitioner of strong, public diplomacy.

Q: How did he operate? Can you give any examples of this cowboyishness?

GORMLEY: I forget the occasion which caused the demonstration at the Embassy against him; I can't recall the exact details or the exact cause, but that evening he was on television explaining his position and denouncing the government. That is a government television station too which allowed him to go on.

Q: Were there any other developments while you were there that we should mention?

GORMLEY: No, not that I can think of. The big thing was the attempt to improve the human rights situation in the country. Again, he was very active politically; White was practically the godfather of an organization that combined all of Stroessner's opponents. There were three traditional parties in the country: the Colorados which Stroessner controlled; the Liberals which were basically businessmen, really conservative but with some idea of political democracy; and a left-wing sort of socialist group called the Federalistas. There was also an opposition Colorado group, most of whom were in exile

in Argentina. White was certainly the godfather of bringing these Colorados, formally or informally, into this national accord which was all the anti-Stroessner forces. This was something that should get most people PNGed. But of course Stroessner never did it, partly because he knew he would be playing into White's hands and partly probably because he was contemptuous even of all his opponents together being able to do anything against him. And he was right because those guys never did, it was another general that did it.

Q: You then came back to Washington to work in International Organizations, in 1981. What were you doing in IO?

GORMLEY: I was in charge of the relations with the United Nations food agencies, all located in Rome: the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Food Council, and the World Food Program.

Q: What were the main issues that you dealt with?

GORMLEY: At the level of the FAO it was the grain producing countries—ourselves, Canada and Australia—versus the third world on continual efforts by the FAO to promote more advantageous terms of trade for food importers. Generally it was the same kind of thing going on in all the UN agencies at the time. The third world was very much on the warpath against the north, held that the whole world economic system was rigged in favor of the rich countries and that they had to right this through the United Nations. We were continually fighting a rear-guard action against things that would hurt the American grain producer, especially wheat; our allies were Australia and Canada, and because of soybeans one of our biggest allies was Brazil. They were very, very useful because they were a third world country themselves, but the Brazilians were usually found on our side on these issues. Besides this fight against the new world economic order which we were waging, in the World Food Program—which is basically food for peace, food for work, type projects—there again we played a rather negative role, especially in trying to prevent

assistance programs in places like Cuba and Vietnam. Probably an ungallant and nasty and mean-spirited fight that I enjoyed waging.

Q: Did you catch any feel in the International Organizations Bureau of the spirit—here was the Reagan administration that came in on the right of our political spectrum and international organizations have always been a touch of anathema to some of the right-wing organizations; what are we doing? American first, etc.—did you catch any of this spirit in your work?

GORMLEY: Oh definitely, because the Assistant Secretary for virtually all the time I was there had been a press secretary in the White House.

Q: This was Gregory Newell?

GORMLEY: Yes. I have to guess at his exact job in the White House, but Newell was about thirty-four, he may even have been younger, who was an amazingly ignorant person. As someone once said, “If what you don't know can't hurt you, Greg Newell is invincible.”

Q: I have heard stories of when he first came on board giving lectures on international organizations to people who knew, obviously, far more than he did; he displayed his ignorance with a sort of arrogance.

GORMLEY: His staff meetings were embarrassing. One of the things he aimed to do—he was well focused in his own limited way—was to get out of one international agency, which as it happened turned out to be UNESCO. It might have been something else, it might have been the FAO because he certainly hated the head of the FAO. As it happened the UNESCO people played into his hands.

Q: It turned into a private little empire of M'Bow. It was a horrible little organization.

GORMLEY: It was a corrupt organization. If you wanted to send a message I think that was the outfit to get out of and we did.

Q: How did you work? You have a head of the bureau for whom, I gather—I don't want to put words in your mouth—you and the other professionals had considerable contempt; how did you operate in this situation?

GORMLEY: We were not completely contemptuous of some of the principles that he was enunciating. I think making the UN a more responsible organization, cutting back on the growth of their budget, there was some sensible things there. So I had no problems with that. It wasn't that difficult to operate because while you might not have had much respect for him there was nothing that you were being forced to do that would violate your conscience.

Q: I take it there was a certain spirit of fun in at last getting back at some of the United Nations organizations which had become sacred cows?

GORMLEY: Yes, though just like old generals going off to work for defense contractors, most old bureaucrats who work in IO will end up working for the UN. The guy who headed our FAO representation in Rome, Roger Sorenson, became their representative in Washington. “Roger, how could you do this?” He said, “It's a living.” After my time, Roger was unable to prevent the US from voting against Saouma being reappointed; it was a hopeless cause that we didn't win.

Q: Who was the head of the FAO?

GORMLEY: Eduardo Saouma, I assume he still is—a Lebanese. I always liked Saouma—maybe for the same reason I grudgingly admired Stroessner—a son of a bitch but he knows what he wants and how to get it. I remember being at a dinner at his house in Rome with Newell and it was amusing to see how Saouma flattered him and played on him, it was so funny. I remember going to Roger's office after Newell's visit, and Roger

was doing a telegram on Newell's great accomplishments during his visit to Rome and he said “I feel almost embarrassed at what I have written about Greg's great job here.” So I said “Roger, if you only feel almost embarrassed obviously you haven't gone far enough, so I would put in a few more outrageously flattering remarks.” “But he'll realize that we are making fun of him,” and I said “No he won't, he'll think it is great.”

Q: Then we come to your last assignment. Your last time was basically dealing with narcotics, is that right?

GORMLEY: Yes.

Q: From 1984 to 1990. You have written an article about part of this time. What period did that cover?

GORMLEY: The article really hit all of the highlights, but it focused on Mexico, which was only one year.

Q: The article was in the Foreign Service Journal, and so that people can be referred to it, of June, 1992. How did you get off to narcotics?

GORMLEY: I got off to narcotics because I couldn't get any other job in 1984, or whenever it was.

Q: So in your first phase in narcotics where were you assigned and what were you doing?

GORMLEY: I was in Washington, I was head of the Latin American division in the program office, which at time consisted of three people, including myself.

Q: The Narcotics Bureau was a new bureau at this time, or relatively new, wasn't it?

GORMLEY: Relatively, but it had started in the Carter administration and we were on our third assistant secretary by the time I got there.

Q: What were you doing when you were in the Washington area?

GORMLEY: An awful lot of it was working on preparing and defending budgets. We were also the backup and the Washington representative of our field offices, representing their needs and issues in Washington. I handled, because of the fact that we were only three people, Colombia myself—I was in effect desk officer. That was the country where at the time most things were happening; the whole focus at that point was on cocaine, that was the center of interest. Then we had another person who handled Bolivia and Peru, and a third Mexico and the Caribbean and anything else that happened to come along.

Q: What was your impression of how we were handling these things?

GORMLEY: Well in the way that the situation is almost hopeless in consideration of the demand in the United States, the State Department never felt comfortable with the narcotics issue. It was an irritant to people higher up in the Department, certainly Shultz never wanted to pay any attention to it. As high as they went at the time was, I guess, Whitehead; he did take a little bit of interest in it—mainly defending the Department politically from charges that it wasn't doing enough. There were a lot of people in the field who were quite enthusiastic and did some rather good things, but the whole thing was quixotic. As long as you have the enormous demand in the United States, what we are doing overseas is almost irrelevant.

Q: Did you have the feeling that this was Vietnam being replayed in a way?

GORMLEY: Very much so, in certain aspects. The major aspect of that being the hopelessness of the odds and the fact that the generals in the war weren't paying attention to what the captains were telling them, or trying to tell them. They kept trying to put the best political gloss on the thing which very often would blow up in your face.

Q: Was it that there was just no way a program would work overseas?

GORMLEY: You may notice in the article, and I meant that article to cover the whole period of my time, there is virtually nothing said about Thailand, even though I spent more time in Thailand than in Mexico. Basically because the Thai program was pretty decent you did have a reasonably effective movement out of production of opium in the north of Thailand; but how much of that was due to our efforts and how much the result of a general economic development of the north? I think the development was the key that allowed it; it just became easier for them to produce cabbages for the Chiang Mai market than to deal with the army coming through and cutting down their opium crop and they could make just as much money raising vegetables. So you did have a pretty successful crop substitution program there, but across the border they were producing more than they ever were.

Q: Did you have this feeling most of the time you were there? What about the people with you?

GORMLEY: Especially in Mexico the DEA and the Ambassador...

Q: Who was the Ambassador then?

GORMLEY: The Ambassador was Charles Pilliod, who had been the chairman of the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. They attempted to pretend that we were getting cooperation from the Mexicans, which we weren't. The Camarena case was sort of a centerpiece...

Q: This was a DEA agent who was kidnapped.

GORMLEY: Who was tortured and murdered by elements which included police. That is rather extensively and well-handled in a book by a journalist, Elaine Shannon, called Desperados. That book, I think, covers it very well. One of the things about the Camarena case that we later learned through tapes—I don't know how these tapes actually came into our hands but they did; the tapes of the interrogation—was that it included a lot of

questions about what he knew about the Commander of the Mexican Army, the Minister of Defense, General, and what he knew about the Minister of Interior, Manuel Bartlett. These names—the Minister of Interior is the second most powerful man in Mexico and the Minister of Defense is awfully powerful—left little doubt that they had an involvement with the drug lords. And what do you do about that in a country like Mexico?

Q: In Mexico, do you think the Ambassador and the DEA were in a way putting the best face on it? Would confrontation make any difference?

GORMLEY: I think I said that in my article. I said that I thought Pilliod's basic thrust was to get away from this style of confrontation that his predecessor, John Gavin, had engaged in. Gavin loved the press, he spoke fluent Spanish for one thing, and he loved to lambaste the Mexicans, sometimes going off half cocked. Certainly I think that Pilliod was quite right that that did not serve any useful purpose, that you had to work with the government. I think he was right in that, but he became an apologist for them, he went too far in the other direction.

Q: What about the bureau? You had as Assistant Secretaries, first, from 1984 to 1986, John Thomas, and from 1986 to 1989, Anne Wrobleski. How did they handle the bureau and how did they feel about this task, which was very high profile as far as public relations went?

GORMLEY: Of course in a way they are both practitioners and victims of the American governmental system. Both Thomas and Wrobleski were political appointees. Thomas's claim to fame was that he had managed George Bush's campaign, when Bush was against Reagan, in Tennessee and he was one of the Bush loyalists that did find a job after Bush became Vice President. Wrobleski had worked with Mrs. Reagan on her drug program. These people are there for a limited amount of time, they want to look good while they are there and that is all that matters. They are interested in their career, in proving themselves, and there is very little interest in what allegedly is their long term charge.

You last two years and then you proclaim yourself a brilliant success and move on. Now unfortunately—these were two political appointees—their successor, Mel Levitsky, who was an FSO, wasn't any different. Again—everything that has happened up to now has been terrible, rotten, worthless, but now that I am in, everything is going great.

Q: I have found this even sitting on efficiency report things. One time I had the chance to observe some people who had succeeded me in a job and I read their efficiency reports and they had turned things around. I remember I had turned things around, and somebody before me had the impression of turning things around. What about the Drug Enforcement Agency; what was your impression of how it was run and its effectiveness?

GORMLEY: I had very little use for most of the people involved in Mexico. The head of it is portrayed very unfavorably in Desperado, which is why I recommend it. He had been in Mexico too long, I think he was on his fifth tour there, maybe longer. He had just been there too long, was too much in bed with the Mexicans; he was an apologist for what they were up to. Since they have difficulty in getting good Spanish speaking people, very often they turn to Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and a lot of them seemed like time-servers to me, to whom the war on drugs was just a ticket to continued employment. I must say that I felt very differently about the organization in Thailand; I don't know why I keep coming back to Thailand, I guess because I like Thailand and I like the Thai people. The head of DEA in Thailand became my best friend; a really super guy. Of course he had a better police force to work with there than you did in Mexico. I think they were reasonably effective in Thailand.

Q: But as you say, you knock it off in Thailand and things just get better for Burma and Laos. You left there and retired in 1990?

GORMLEY: I left Thailand in 1989 and I spent some time on TDY in Peru, and most of the rest of the time I was working on some projects to improve the program in Mexico.

Q: What about your glimpses of how things were working in Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and other places like that. Was it sort of a mirror of Mexico?

GORMLEY: I had a lot of respect for the professionalism of the Colombian police. It is a world apart from Mexico. They are a good organization. Certainly one of the finest people I ever met in the war on drugs was Colonel Jaime Ramirez, the head of the narcotics police in Colombia, who was killed by the traffickers after he left that job. I guess I was in Thailand when I got the news that he had been assassinated and my reaction was that this whole effort is not worth the life of Jaime Ramirez. It is just not worth it.

Q: I take it that as you see the situation, as long as the demand and the money are in the States it will come in—however.

GORMLEY: Absolutely. You have a lot of good people in Colombia who have really put their lives on the line. I don't know what the situation is now, but they were killing about two judges a month when I was there, including one time—I happened to be in Bogot#—when they took the Supreme Court and murdered three-fourths of it. I remember having dinner one time with the wife of one of the justices who had survived because he was out of the country at the time and she was saying “look at the kind of sacrifices we are putting up with, look at the way we have to live, and for what? What are you doing in the States?” I didn't have much of an answer for that.

Q: What was the feeling among those like yourself who were not political animals but just doing your job, was it that we ought to legalize the stuff?

GORMLEY: I know of almost no one who would say that, although I would. In general you know you go along with the job.

Q: Then you retired in...

GORMLEY: In September of 1990, with the invitation of the Director General.

Q: Looking at your time in narcotics did you feel that you had a hand in doing anything positive on that?

GORMLEY: I don't know about positive results, certainly I felt positive about a lot of the things I was involved in. I really enjoyed in Mexico building up a team of people who despite the obstacles we were facing had a great esprit. I had a great feeling for the people who worked with me there. In Bangkok you could do more and I changed the focus there from just giving the police cars and “stuff” into trying a computerized system—of checking everyone as they came in—connected with the narcotics police; of strengthening their secure communications and doing things like that instead of just giving them cars and radios. The people I enjoyed working with in Bangkok especially were the public health people. I sponsored a big conference for the Bangkok health department on AIDS which was just beginning to...

Q: AIDS has become a real...

GORMLEY: Dreadful. I think our resources were not enough to do anything about it.

Q: Bangkok at the time we are talking about had turned into the sex capital of the world, hadn't it?

GORMLEY: I don't know of the world.

Q: There were package tours coming from Europe and from Japan and elsewhere, with this very much in mind; more than anywhere else I can think of.

GORMLEY: Oh yes, and there were very little preventive measures taken.

Q: It came just at the time that AIDS was beginning to spread out into the prostitution area as opposed to having been limited more to the homosexual world before that.

GORMLEY: Of course you have an enormous male homosexual prostitution population in Thailand. Although oddly enough at least our statistics showed that most of the AIDS was in the female prostitutes, I don't know why that was.

Q: Just to nail things down, when did you serve in Mexico and when did you serve in Thailand?

GORMLEY: On the narcotics business I got into Mexico in August of 1986 and stayed until October of 1987?

Q: You were the narcotics officer?

GORMLEY: The counselor. And then from October of 1987 up until August of 1989 I was in Thailand.

Q: How were you received in Thailand by the Embassy and the Ambassador?

GORMLEY: Very well. Our Ambassador there was Bill Brown who was in his last days and then Dan O'Donahue came in. The DCM was first Joe Winder and then Vic Tomseth. Winder took a very, very active role in narcotics. In Mexico the DCM had one meeting on narcotics while I was there and that was about a silly-ass telegram from USIS and that was it, nothing else. Winder had a meeting every week, and when any issue came up you always had access to him. He was very, very active. And there was a very cooperative spirit between ourselves, DEA, and the Agency. The Agency played a very big role, in a way an overt role, in Thailand because they did the crop survey in the north. Again, in Mexico they wouldn't allow us to do anything but in Thailand we went over every inch of that territory and took pictures. So the Agency and ourselves and DEA had a very good relationship, managed by the DCM and the Ambassador. Much less so Brown; O'Donohue was a very activist type who gets involved, overinvolved, in every aspect of the Embassy's operation.

Q: Well he had also been in Burma, too, hadn't he? And obviously concerned about the problem as in Burma that was our main thing, so he was well indoctrinated into that.

GORMLEY: Yes and you really were a major part of the Embassy team in Bangkok which you weren't in Mexico.

Q: I want to thank you very much. It has been fun.

End of interview